



Coffee and Carnival Bears by TragicBlackButterfly

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Summary: "Eddie Kaspbrak knew how many germs were in a person's mouth, and he would only swap spit with his soulmate." Finding your soulmate should be pretty straightforward, but not for Eddie. Not when there were two possible candidates, and he had no idea which one it was. Eddie/Richie soulmate au with some Bill/Stan on the side

1. Reddie

Eddie Kaspbrak took a puff of his inhaler, wishing that simple act would be enough to quell his racing heart. He kept glancing down at his left wrist, and each time he did, he could feel his anxiety beginning to act up again. But every time he got himself to calm down again, he would look down and see that fucking timer again, and then he was right back at square one.

"Calm down, Eddie. Don't give yourself a panic attack," Stan Uris said for what sounded like the tenth time. Stan had no room to talk; he was just as wound as Eddie, and no matter how many times he tried to deny it, Eddie had caught him glancing at the timer on his own wrist periodically all morning.

Both of them were waiting for the same, fated moment: when their timers would go off, and their soulmates.

The idea of a soulmate had Eddie pulling out his inhaler again. This whole ordeal was too fucking inconvenient for him. He was just starting college. He didn't need this now! Why couldn't he have met his soulmate at a less stressful time in his life?

Part of Eddie almost wished that Stan was his soulmate, but there was no hope there. Stan and Eddie's timers were five seconds apart. Five, measly seconds, but that made all the difference. Plus, he'd known Stan for years. If his timer was going to go off for him, then it would have done so already.

"Three minutes," Eddie rasped, taking another puff. "Less than three minutes, and we're meeting *the one*. I'm gonna be fucking sick. This is bullshit."

"Cool it, Eddie. You're just making it worse." Stan grimaced and tugged his sleeve over the timer. "You're better off not paying attention. You'll just get stressed out more."

"Me? Stressed?" Eddie choked through a laugh and was about to take another puff off his inhaler when Stan's hand grabbed his wrist. He raised an eyebrow, and Eddie hated to admit that he could see his

point.

"Sorry, Stan. This whole soulmate thing is just a pain in the ass. What if I don't even like them?"

"They're your soulmate. Isn't it basically a guarantee that you'll get along?" Stan said all of this with the air of somebody who didn't believe it either, but he'd heard it so many times that repeating it was instinctive. Eddie felt *so much* better.

What if they didn't even like him? Eddie wasn't exactly what one might call *a catch*. He was so small, for one. Hell, he couldn't even get into an R-rated movie without an ID, he was so fucking short.

Then there was the thing about his mother. Sonia Kaspbrak had been so overbearing about his health that even the smallest cough could send his heart into a frenzy, and he'd be scrambling for his inhaler.

So that made him a short, gay hypochondriac.

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he hurriedly took another puff from his inhaler. What if his soulmate was a *girl*? Would fate be that cruel to him?

Eddie's feet stopped against the pavement. "I can't do this. I'm not going to do this. I refuse! This stupid timer can't decide who I'm going to be with for the rest of my life!"

"Eddie, calm down." Stan was starting to get irritated. Maybe it was a good thing they *weren't* soulmates. They would never get along, at least not for long periods of time. "This isn't something you can just deny. You're going to meet them."

"This isn't something I can deal with, Stan! I'm not going to! I'm going to turn around, walk straight back to our dorm, and-" Eddie turned to dart around the corner, prepared to stay in his room for the rest of the day.

"Hey, watch it!"

Next thing Eddie knew, his favorite pink polo was covered in the remnants of an iced frappuccino and whipped cream. He hissed a

curse and wiped at the spilled drink. As if today couldn't get any worse! Now he was sticky, cold, and looked like a complete idiot to meet his-

Soulmate.

Eddie's eyes lifted to the two boys standing in front of him, and he felt his timer go off. He didn't hear any noise, at least not externally. He heard it in his head, a nagging little chime that said, *There he is!*

Only, there were two of them, and Eddie had no clue which was which. One was tall and gangly, with dark curls and thick, coke-bottle glasses. He'd been the one holding the drink that Eddie was now, unfortunately, covered in. For a moment, he looked apologetic. Then, he gave Eddie a once-over and grinned.

"Hey, would you look at that! My drink looks even better on you, toots!"

"Fuck off," Eddie grumbled, taking off his jacket so he could finish wiping his shirt. "Were you even watching where you were going?"

"Technically, *you* ran into *us*, cutie," he argued with a nonchalant shrug. "I'll let it slide if you let me buy you a coffee."

"Are you kidding me?" Eddie's voice rose an octave; he could already feel his asthma acting up.

"C-c-cut it out, Ruh-Richie," said the other boy, and Eddie looked at him for the first time. He was... pretty attractive. If Eddie had a type, it was probably this guy, with nice, auburn hair, blue eyes, and charisma practically rolling off of him.

Despite all that, Eddie found his eyes drawn back to this Richie, but he was pretty sure that was pure annoyance. He was still wearing that grin, and he hadn't taken his eyes off of Eddie.

"A-are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Eddie muttered severely, and then softer, "Thanks."

"S-sorry about that. We w-w-eren't paying a-a-attention." He held out

his hand for Eddie and then Stan. "I'm B-B-Bill, and this is Ruh-Richie."

"The pleasure's all mine." Richie winked at Eddie, who rolled his eyes and looked back to Bill.

"I'm Eddie. This is Stan." Eddie nodded his head toward Stan, and only then did he realize how pale his friend had grown. He kept staring between the two boys in front of him and then glancing at his wrist.

Which made Eddie look down at his own wrist, too. *Shit. Shit.*

"Shit!" he said aloud, backing up a few steps. He could feel his breath picking up again, and he fumbled for his inhaler. He couldn't believe it. He'd been so caught up worrying about the coffee all over him that he'd forgotten his timer had gone off.

"Hey, Eds, you okay?" Richie actually sounded remotely concerned. He took a step closer, but Eddie brought his advance to a stop with a single glare.

"Don't call me that." Eddie shoved his inhaler away and took a deep breath. He opened his mouth to speak, but the moment he tried to find words, his throat began to close up again. His mouth found the aspirator again, and Stan took it upon himself to clarify.

"You two. Did your timers run out? Because ours just did."

"Buh-buh-both of you?" Eddie saw the way Bill looked at Stan and how Stan's cheeks reddened under the attention, and he wished he could unsee it. They couldn't even be sure which was which, and they were already making googly eyes at each other!

"Ours were five seconds apart. Whose timer went off first?" he asked, a little bit more demanding than need be. He couldn't help it; he wanted clarification, and he wanted it immediately.

"It's obvious, ain't it, Eds? It's you and me, and Big Bill and Stan the Man here. We're a match made in heaven!" Richie tried to insist, grinning from ear to ear.

Eddie wasn't having that. "Stop calling me that. And how can you be sure? Did your timer go off before Bill's?"

A strange expression flickered through Richie's bug eyes, but it was gone before Eddie could decipher what it might have been. All at once, he felt guilty. He hadn't meant for it to sound like he didn't want Richie as a soulmate. What he wanted was *certainty*. Soulmates were a big deal, and he didn't want to end up with the wrong one because nobody was paying attention at the right time. He took a deep breath.

"What if you're wrong, though? That's not fair to any of us if we pair up with the wrong person," Eddie reasoned, relieved when he saw Richie nod in agreement. The kicked puppy dog look never worked on Eddie, but *damn*, Richie was pretty fucking good at it. That should've been his first sign that Richie had been right all along.

"I don't know whose was going off first," Richie admitted with a clueless glance at Bill. "We just knew ours were going off around the same time today."

"So neither of you have any idea?" Stan repeated with a shake of his head. "How are we supposed to figure it out then? That's the whole point of the timers."

"Muh-muh-maybe we should juh-just play it by ear? W-we go on a few duh-dates and s-see who we're most com-com-patible with? Sh-shouldn't be tuh-too hard," Bill suggested thoughtfully.

Eddie bit his lip, considering that. What if Bill was wrong, though? Just because somebody was a person's soulmate didn't mean they would be compatible. He'd seen some couples who didn't even get along but still stayed together because 'fate demanded it.'

"Or we could all just make out?" Richie suggested with a casual shrug that didn't match his tone. His eyes, filled with a strange kind of determination, settled on Eddie, who couldn't help but feel like Richie had already decided who his soulmate was gonna be. "See whose tongue we're more compatible with? Your mom can go first."

"Buh-beep beep, Trashmouth," Bill warned. When Stan and Eddie

exchanged puzzled looks, he added, "That's what we say when Richie goes too far."

"Sounds like he needs to hear it," Eddie muttered.

"Aw, Eds, you're lucky you're so cute!" Richie suddenly slung an arm over Eddie's shoulder with one hand and began to pinch his cheeks with the other. "Cute cute *cute*!"

"You asshole! Get your fucking hands off me! I don't know where those have been!"

"Just all over your mom. Nothing to worry about! Oh, and down my pants, but that's-"

"Disgusting! That's fucking *gross*! Let me go!"

That was the day that Eddie Kaspbrak met his soulmate. Problem was, he had no fucking clue which one it was, and he *really* couldn't decide which one he *wished* it was. Bill was handsome, charismatic, and fun to be around.; Eddie didn't even mind the stutter. Richie was just... Richie. Eddie couldn't figure out how else to describe the literal torpedo of a man. He was too tall and thought he was too damn funny and had too much damn energy, and Eddie couldn't believe how much he was warming up to the idiot.

They went through with Bill's plan to go on a few dates and see how things went. Stan went with Richie first, and Eddie could tell right off the bat that he didn't want to. He'd been given full control over where they went and what they did, and Eddie felt a pang of pity when he saw Stan pick up his bird-watching guide.

"Really, Stan? On the first date?"

Stan shrugged, an almost devious grin curling his lips. "Hey, if he can't handle me bird-watching, then there's no way he's my soulmate. I just thought we would settle this the easy way."

Eddie tapped his pencil on the edge of his desk. "You're really hoping for Bill, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?" Stan replied without hesitation. When Eddie didn't say

anything, Stan gave him a knowing look and left the dorm for his date. What the hell was *that* all about?

Eddie locked up soon after, out on his way to meet up with Bill. They'd agreed on a coffee date, nothing too romantic or fancy. Eddie wasn't about to complain; he didn't want there to be any expectations between them, not when they still weren't sure. As much as he wanted to kick and fight the whole soulmate thing, there were still some things he only wanted to do with the person meant for him.

Like kiss. It sounded like such a girly thing, but he wanted his first kiss to be with his soulmate.

Bill understood that, the moment Eddie explained it to him like some disclaimer on a bottle of meds. "Shu-shu-sure. We'll keep it platonic for now."

"Thanks, Bill. I appreciate it," Eddie murmured, a little anxious about being there alone with Bill. The weight of his inhaler felt reassuring in his pocket.

The two of them grabbed a table by the window and settled in for a nice, quiet date. Eddie learned that Bill was an amazing storyteller, and he noticed that when he was tangled up in one of his stories, Bill didn't stutter at all. Eddie could have listened to him tell stories forever.

He barely noticed that several hours had passed until he went to take a drink of his cappuccino and discovered it had gone cold. He made a face, setting it back down, and Bill laughed. That was a pleasant sound. He could get used to Bill laughing.

Then he thought of Richie laughing, and heat began to pool in his cheeks. He had to *stop*. What was the point of getting his hopes up about either of them, only to find out that the other was his actual soulmate? That would just be too cruel. For the moment, he had to keep things strictly platonic between *all of them*. He only hoped Stan was on the same page.

"S-sorry, I'm puh-probably boring you." Bill rubbed the back of his neck, a little apologetic.

"No, your stories are amazing! Really, you should write some of these down and try to publish. I just know you'd be successful," Eddie told him honestly, and it was worth it to see the smile it put on Bill's face. Even if he wasn't Eddie's soulmate, he thought the two of them would be good friends regardless.

By the time Eddie got back to the dorm room, Stan was already there, his nose buried in his History report. He barely glanced up while Eddie kicked his shoes off, and it wasn't until Eddie sagged into his own desk chair that Stan turned around and fixed him with a firm look. Eddie didn't think it went very well with Richie.

"How was your date with Bill?" he asked, carefully impassive.

"Not bad. We had coffee, and he told stories. He's a great storyteller. What about you and Richie?"

Stan pursed his lips and looked away. "He was a gentleman, except for all of his stupid mom jokes. He listened to everything I had to tell him about bird watching, didn't complain too much, and even bought me lunch. And then...."

"And then?" Eddie raised an eyebrow, all but hanging on on Stan's next words. His mind could only jump to the worst possible conclusion: they had kissed. Richie had kissed Stan, and they were definitely soulmates, and Eddie didn't even get a chance to find out if he and Richie were soulmates because they'd already decided for him, and-

"Aspirator, Kaspbrak," Stan warned, and Eddie fumbled for his inhaler. He waited until Eddie had calmed down before he continued. "And then he said that he hopes we're not soulmates."

"He... he said... *why* would he say that?" Eddie's heart hammered, and he quickly took another puff before he got out of control again.

Stan shrugged a little as he turned around in his chair, now struggling to keep from smiling. "Oh, I have no idea. It's definitely not because he has it in his head that somebody else is his soulmate."

"That's-that's not fair to you, though! What an fucking asshole!" Eddie

tossed his inhaler onto his desk to cover the fluttering in his chest.

"I didn't take it personally." Stan looked Eddie over, not buying the act for a minute. "I told him I hope he's not my soulmate, too"

"What?" Eddie couldn't believe what he was hearing. He rolled his eyes and stood up to pace, needing to expel some of his energy. "How could the two of you act like this? What about Bill and me? Are we the only ones taking this shit seriously?"

"Would you calm down already? It's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?!"

"Your voice is doing that high-pitched thing again."

"I know it is!" Eddie sat back down again, huffing, and began to fiddle with his aspirator. He wanted to stay mad at them, he really did, but his mind kept flashing back to that look Richie had been giving him. So determined, so sure.... Eddie shook his head.

No. It just wasn't enough for him. He wanted certainty. He wanted to be positive. What was the point if they weren't sure who belonged together?

He would know tomorrow. That was when he and Richie had their date, and Stan and Bill were having theirs.

He'd gotten a text earlier that morning to let him know that Richie would be planning everything and not to worry, which only made Eddie worry more. Eddie liked being in control. He liked knowing what was about to happen, and Richie was a wild, unpredictable force in his life that he didn't know how to anticipate.

Eddie made sure to take his aspirator.

He followed Richie's instructions to meet him at the cafe in town, but not to go in. Probably because Bill took his 'coffee date' idea. Eddie grinned a little; he didn't imagine Richie was very happy about that.

"Eddie Spaghetti!" An arm appeared around his shoulder and tugged him flush against a tall body.

"Ugh! Did you have to use so much cologne?" Eddie tried to squirm away, his cheeks red, but Richie's grip was strong, and he didn't hate that cologne as much as he pretended. "And what did you just call me?"

"My cute, little Eddie Spaghetti, of course! Mwah!" He placed a loud kiss on Eddie's cheek, and finally, Eddie managed to get away from him now.

"Okay, let's make some ground rules, okay? No PDA." Eddie held up both hands, as if that might keep Richie Tozier at bay. "Not until we have this soulmates thing sorted out."

Richie stared, his lips pressed into a tight, frustrated line. Then his eyes widened, and he smirked. "I went to second base with Stan yesterday."

"No you fucking didn't! Stan doesn't do second base on a first date!" Eddie argued immediately.

"Shit!" Richie kicked at the curb, disappointed. Then, pouting, he said, "Okay, but look!" and took one of Eddie's hands into his own. Their fingers slotted together perfectly, snugly, and Eddie sucked in a quick breath at the unimaginable warmth. Richie stepped closer, waiting with baited breath for Eddie's decision.

But Eddie couldn't make a decision. He couldn't think about anything except how nice it felt to have Richie hold his hand. He opened his mouth once to argue, say he didn't think this was a good idea, but the words never left him. Richie took this as a good sign and stepped even closer, his pout having turned into a grin.

"See? A little hand-holding won't do any harm. Your mom sure enjoyed it."

Eddie tried to pull his hand back. "Beep beep, Richie."

"Aw, come on! Don't beep me on this! Just hold my hand some, and I won't go through with my plan to stick my tongue down your throat while we're riding the Ferris Wheel," Richie promised, lip stuck out pleadingly.

"Ferris Wheel!?" Eddie repeated, horror piercing through his stomach. He barely noticed that Richie had started to pull him along the sidewalk. "I can't get on a Ferris Wheel! Where would you even *find* a Ferris Wheel?"

"At the carnival. The fliers are literally everywhere. How do you not know about this?" Richie asked conversationally.

"Carnival?! You want to go to the *carnival*? Don't you know what happens at carnivals!?"

"Don't worry, Eds. I won't let any creepy assholes mistake you for a child and try to kidnap you."

Eddie fixed him with a scathing look. "I'm not worried about being fucking *abducted*! Do you know how many diseases can originate from a carnival? Rides riddled with germs, food prepared with unsafe work practices, and-" He cut himself off, suddenly aware of how Richie was staring at him with that shit-eating grin still in place. "And I'm ruining this, aren't I?"

"Nah, you're cute when you rant about germs and shit, and that's something I never thought I would find attractive. So rides are off, the food is off-"

"Hey, you can put whatever you want into that trashmouth of yours." Eddie could feel his cheeks getting hot again. Richie thought he was attractive? When he ranted about *germs*? He must have been lying, trying to make Eddie feel better about the whole thing.

But when he examined Richie's expression for a hint of a lie, he found nothing of the sort. So far, Richie was being as unpredictable as Eddie had expected of him.

"Besides, I'm not kissing you, so it's not like it matters to me what you eat."

"What? I'm not even getting a goodnight kiss? This is fucking injustice, Eds. I'm heartbroken. Stan the Man gave me a smooch." Richie complained, offended, and Eddie had to roll his eyes at the same, underhanded trick.

"No, he fucking didn't."

"No! He fucking didn't!" Richie huffed, annoyed, and kicked at a passing rock. Shit! Eddie was just making everything worse. Richie probably didn't want to even be on this date anymore. If he didn't want Stan as a soulmate before, he probably did now.

He probably didn't want to hold hands anymore, either. Probably just kept it up to make Eddie feel better. Fuck! Eddie couldn't stand himself sometimes. He hated being the way he was, constantly anxious about germs and diseases. Just the way his mother had raised him.

He figured he should give Richie an out. Tell him that they didn't have to stay on the date if Richie would rather just call it quits.

Eddie went to pull his hand back; Richie held on tightly. "Eds, mah boy, I'm not done with that yet."

The tense atmosphere dissipated just like that, and Eddie relaxed back into the hand-holding. Not without a scoff first, though. "What kind of shit accent even is that?"

"What? Can't you tell?"

"Sounds like your regular shit voice to me." Eddie squeezed Richie's hand, suddenly aware of how much he wanted to do just that for the rest of his life.

The carnival wasn't even that bad, all things considered. Richie convinced him to ride the merry-go-round, and it wasn't entirely catastrophic. He'd settled on an unmoving lion, while Richie rode on a 'wild steed' that he pretended was trying to throw him. He tried to smooth talk Eddie onto the Ferris Wheel, but Eddie remained firm.

"Not on the first date," he teased, warily eyeing the intimidating contraption as he tugged Richie away. Thankfully, Richie followed without trouble, far too focused on Eddie's words to care about the carnival around them.

"So there's gonna be a second date?" Richie asked hopefully, one hand still wrapped around Eddie's and the other holding a caramel apple.

"If Bill doesn't turn out to be my soulmate, and Stan yours," Eddie conceded slowly.

"Uh. Yeah. There's always that." Richie's hand tightened around Eddie's, as if Eddie might try to run away if given the opportunity. Which was bullshit. Eddie liked spending time with Richie. It felt natural, the most natural thing he'd ever felt.

"Even if we're not soulmates... we could always hang out? I mean. Stan's my best friend, and Bill's yours, right? So we'll definitely still see each other," Eddie quickly added. He had to make sure that Richie understood that he still wanted to spend time with him, soulmate or not. He had more fun with Richie than he ever had in his entire life. Even if they weren't soulmates, he didn't want to lose that.

That should've been Eddie's second sign.

"Of course, Eddie Spaghetti! You're stuck with me now!" Richie wrapped his arm around Eddie's shoulders again, and he left a sticky kiss on the side of Eddie's temple.

"Didn't I tell you to stop doing that shit?!"

"I can't help myself, Eds! You're just so fucking adorable!" Richie tossed away the rest of his caramel apple and tugged Eddie to a stop. He turned, squinting around for something, and hummed thoughtfully to himself. This all seemed like a dangerous combination to Eddie.

"What is it?"

Richie grinned. "I'm gonna win you a huge ass teddy bear."

"No, you're not," Eddie disagreed firmly.

"Yeah, I am. Just try and stop me!" Richie let go of Eddie for the first time all night and began to saunter toward one of the various booths vying for his attention. Alarmed, Eddie chased after him, quickly running in front of him to place two hands on his chest. As expected, Richie stopped, grinning ear to ear because Eddie initiated contact for once.

"You really shouldn't. These games are all rigged! You'll just be wasting your money," he insisted.

"Listen, Eds, I am winning you a huge ass teddy bear, and nothin' you say is gonna talk me out of it. You might as well sit back, look cute, and watch a master at work. Oh, and try not to fall in love with me. I don't know how we'd break the news to your mom." With a wink, Richie sauntered around Eddie, who could only turn and watch helplessly as his date casually approached the softball game.

The object of the game? Use the softball to knock over three milk bottles, but Eddie knew better. He knew the softball was probably filled with cork to make it lighter, and the bottles on the bottom of the stack probably had lead in them to make them heavier. An impossible game to win. Richie might as well have picked the balloon dart toss with its dull darts and half-inflated balloons.

If Richie realized the odds weren't in his favor, he never showed it. He stepped up to the booth, a five-dollar bill in his hand, and handed it over. "Gimme your best balls, mah good sir!" he commanded in what was supposed to be another accent, but Eddie still couldn't hear a difference.

The carnie gave a look to Richie and then Eddie. He popped a bubble with his gum and then smiled sweetly. "First date, boys?"

"First time doing your job?" Richie fired back impatiently. Was pissing the guy off part of the plan? Because this seemed like a shitty plan!

The attendant's jaw tightened before he smiled again. He dropped three balls onto the stand and directed Richie to the stack of bottles on the left. Eddie didn't like this. He didn't like the look the carnie kept giving Richie, who remained blissfully oblivious to what was about to happen.

Richie threw the first ball. Eddie held his breath, not surprised when the ball bounced right off the milk bottles. He *knew* this was a bad idea. But Richie just turned, gave him a self-satisfied smirk, and picked up the next ball. He pulled his arm back, readying the throw, and-

"Ow! My arm!" Richie yelled suddenly. He dropped the ball and brought up his other hand to cradle his bicep. "Fuck! I think I pulled a fucking muscle!"

"Richie? Are you okay?" Eddie rushed forward, ready to inspect the arm in question, but Richie wouldn't stand still long enough for him to get close.

"I'll sue you! I'll sue the ass off this whole carnival!" Richie started rambling at the startled attendant. "My dad's a lawyer, and he'll take every last dime you've ever made at this shitty booth!"

"Hey, wait, I, uh...." The attendant looked around nervously; Richie was drawing attention to them.

"I could've been a professional softball player, asshole! I know how that ball's supposed to weigh! Fuck!" He squeezed his arm, still shrugging off a panicky Eddie. "You'll never be able to show your face in this town again!"

"Wait, wait, lower your voice! I-I'll-what do I have to do to make this go away?" the carnie pleaded desperately.

Richie took a deep, painful breath. "That huge ass teddy bear... Give it to me, and I'll walk away now."

Eddie couldn't believe what he was hearing. A *teddy bear*? All at once, he realized what was happening. He shook his head, amazed, and pulled out his inhaler to cover up a snort of laughter.

"Please, it's the only thing that will keep mah boy Eds here from ditching my ass after I've fucked up my arm like this!" Richie carried on dramatically, sniffing.

"Can't even throw a softball without embarrassing me. I can't believe this shit," Eddie added with a disappointed shake of his head. "I don't even know why the fuck I'm still with you!"

"Eds, please! I can change!" Richie begged, his 'uninjured' hand flying out to grasp Eddie's shirt. With a scoff, Eddie pushed him away and opened his mouth to fire back.

A teddy bear appeared in front of them, floppy and fluffy and really pink. The attendant looked fed up. "Just take the teddy bear and get out of here. I don't get paid enough for this shit."

"Thank you, my good sir!" With a flourish, Richie grabbed the bear and Eddie's hand and rushed them away before the carnie could change his mind.

The two of them ran, laughing, until the music from the carnival was naught but a dim noise in the night. They slowed to a walk, fingers still intertwined, and took their time getting back to the dorms. The air was nice, the autumn still warm enough that Eddie didn't get cold. In fact, he felt hot. His cheeks were flushed and stiff from smiling, and heart wouldn't stop racing.

He looked over at Richie, who looked like amazingly idiotic carrying that stupid pink bear. He couldn't figure out why Stan didn't want Richie as a soulmate. Sure, some of his jokes were an acquired taste, but he was still fun. And while Bill might have been more handsome, Richie wasn't bad to look at, either.

Plus, there was something about Richie that Eddie just couldn't put his finger on. He squinted in the dark at him, trying to figure it out. Before he could figure it out, Richie was talking again.

"So how bad's your asthma? Is that something I should be really concerned about or...?" Richie asked, breaking Eddie out of his thoughts.

Eddie looked down at the aspirator still in his hand and hastily pocketed it. "I don't actually have asthma. It's mostly in my head thanks to my mom. When I was a kid, she was kinda overbearing. She had me convinced that there was more wrong with me than there actually is."

He didn't know what he expected of Richie, but it definitely wasn't to feel him tighten his hold on Eddie's hand and say, "My parents ignored me. Too busy being fucking drunk to care about their kid. Wonder what's worse: caring too much or not caring at all?"

Eddie stared up at Richie in amazement. How anybody could ignore

Richie was beyond him, and not just because he was so fucking loud most of the time. Eddie squeezed his hand; if they *were* soulmates, Eddie vowed that he would never let Richie feel like he was being ignored. And even if they weren't-

"You seem pretty healthy to me. Wait!" Richie pulled them to a stop and bent down to press his ear to Eddie's chest. Eddie felt his face heat up. "I dunno. Maybe some mouth-to-mouth would help."

"Richie-"

"No, listen, I asked your mom after I boned her last night, and she said-"

"Beep beep, Richie." Eddie punched him in the arm and shoved him away, his heart speeding up again. Every time Richie got too close, Eddie felt like he had to push him away. He almost didn't trust himself not to do anything that might cross that platonic line he'd been struggling to keep in place all night.

"Yeah, yeah, Eds. No smooches. You might've mentioned it." Richie took a deep breath, visibly frustrated, and Eddie felt a surge of guilt in his gut. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to kiss Richie; he actually wanted to do that so much, it felt almost like a physical *need*.

But no. Eddie Kaspbrak knew how many germs were in a person's mouth, and he would only swap spit with his fucking *soulmate*.

"Maybe I should just-"

"Hold on, Eds. Work with me here." Richie pulled him aside, and Eddie gave him the benefit of the doubt. He did worry a bit when Richie pulled them between two buildings, where not even the streetlights could illuminate them. Did Richie not know how many diseases could stew in an alleyway? And what if there was a-*there was*. A *dumpster*. Basically breeding grounds for all kinds of infections.

But then Richie pressed him against a brick wall, and Eddie forgot all about infections and germs. Richie dropped the bear and took off his glasses, and his eyes were so much more intense when they weren't

amplified by his coke-bottle lenses. He took Eddie's face in his hands, and the smaller boy began to panic.

What was he doing?! Didn't he just say he wouldn't kiss him? Or was Richie just addressing that yeah, he remembered Eddie didn't want him to kiss him? Before he could freak out too much, Richie bent down, pressed his forehead against Eddie's, and just held him.

Eddie felt his heart hit a frantic tempo. The intimacy of the gesture was so unexpected, he almost didn't know how to handle it. Swallowing, he reached his hands up to wrap around Richie's neck, fingers sifting through thick, soft curls. Richie smiled, eyes closed, so much more serene and quiet than Eddie could have ever anticipated.

Just when Eddie had started to relax, Richie opened his mouth. "Just you wait, Eddie Spaghetti. When you finally come to your senses and agree that you and I were made for each other, I'm gonna kiss you so fucking hard, you won't even remember your name when I'm done with you. You'll just know you're Richie Tozier's bitch."

Eddie scoffed. How could somebody make something so vulgar actually sound romantic? Only Richie. So he gave in a little and kissed Richie on the cheek.

"Guess you better hope I am your soulmate, then. Otherwise you'll probably end up being Stan's bitch." Eddie laughed at the actual horror he saw in Richie's eyes. He ducked out of his grasp, grinning to himself that he managed to shut up the infamous Trashmouth, and was about to make a clean getaway when Richie grabbed his hand again.

"Hey! Don't forget Mr. Snugglepuss. I scammed him fair and square for you!" Richie tossed him the bear in question. Eddie gave him a stern look.

"I'm not calling him that," he warned, backing away.

"What? Why not? It's a perfectly good name! Mr. Snugglepuss is offended." Glasses back on, Richie leaned his lanky body against the wall and crossed his arms, shaking his head in disappointment.

"That's not his name. Stop calling him that!"

"Come on, Eds-"

"And stop calling ME that!"

"Well, I suppose you can call him Richie, if you think you're gonna miss me that much!"

Eddie gave him a sweet smile. "I think I'll call him Bill."

Richie deadpanned. "Don't you fucking dare. I will take Mr. Snugglepuss back, and you'll only see him every other holiday."

Eddie stopped walking, turning back around to grin at Richie. "Good night, Tozier."

"Night, Kaspbrak. Let your mom know I'll be seeing her tonight."

"Fuck off already!"

By the time Eddie had gotten back to his dorm room (twenty minutes later because Richie kept stopping him), he was still grinning like an idiot. Stan looked over at him, curious, and then furrowed his brow at the giant pink teddy bear. Eddie hastily took Mr. Snugglepuss to his room and settled him beside the bed.

"So how was your date with Bill?" he asked nonchalantly, hoping to get around the topic of the bear only slightly smaller than him.

"Why do you have a pink teddy bear?" Stan deflected immediately. The date must have gone well, then. Stan wasn't one to brag, especially when he really liked somebody.

"Mr. Snugglepuss. We went to the carnival. Richie won him." He didn't mention Richie's unorthodox method of *winning*. Stan would have either rolled his eyes or laughed his ass off.

"A carnival?" Stan scrunched up his nose. "I bet you enjoyed that."

"It... wasn't that bad. I enjoyed myself, and I'm guessing you did, too?" Eddie remarked just to see Stan go as red as a tomato. "Do you

think Richie was right in the beginning?"

"Beats me. It's possible, but there's no real way to be sure. We can go on as many dates as we want, but in the end, will we ever really know the truth?" Stan drummed his fingers on the desk; if the lighting had been better, Eddie would've seen the hickey on his neck that he hastily covered with his shirt collar.

As much as Eddie didn't want to admit it... Stan had a point. They really wouldn't know, not really. They could fake it and pretend like they were sure. Eddie could wish that Richie was his soulmate, but doubt would always linger in the back of his head.

Doubt that he'd made the wrong choice.

He kept thinking about that all night, trying his best to figure out a real solution, but nothing came to mind. This was why he never wanted a soulmate to begin with! What was supposed to be the most straightforward moment of his life had turned into the most complicated, and it was bullshit. All bullshit.

Just like the pills his mother used to feed him. Just like the inhaler. Just like the rest of his fucking life.

"H-hey, Eddie? Are yuh-yuh-you okay?"

Eddie gave Bill a grim smile. They were on their way off campus for the day. They both had English 101 at the same time, and Eddie liked having somebody to walk back to the dorm with. Spending time with Bill was nice and easy, and he couldn't figure out if it felt as natural to be with him as it had being with Richie.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking about this whole soulmate thing." He huffed a little, frustrated, and stopped walking. "Bill, how do you think we should figure this shit out?"

"I've buh-buh-been thinking about th-that," Bill confessed quietly. He motioned Eddie to follow him over toward a tree, where they could talk in private and be out of the sun. Eddie tried not to get his hopes up too high; he really wanted to know, but what solution could Bill have come up with that they all overlooked?

"What is it? What's your idea? I'm all ears."

Bill bit his lip for a moment. "Well, I w-was thinking... Wh-what if we k-k-kissed?"

"Kissed?" Eddie repeated numbly, feeling himself go pale.

"Yeah. D-d-don't you think we'd kn-know? Soulmate ch-chemistry and all th-that."

Bill made a good point. At least, it *sounded* like a good point. Eddie just couldn't decide if it was a point he wanted to hear. What if Bill wasn't his soulmate? Then he would have wasted his first kiss on somebody he didn't even belong with.

But how would they know otherwise? What if Bill was right, and they could tell just by kissing? He didn't like it... but maybe it was a sacrifice he'd have to make.

Swallowing tightly, Eddie nodded. "Okay. Just... do it quick, before I chicken out."

Bill took a deep breath and stepped closer to Eddie, who backed up against the tree nervously. The longer he put this off, the better, he reasoned. But why did his heart begin racing like that? Was that normal?

Before he knew it, Bill was even closer. Raising his hands to life up Eddie's chin. Eddie tried to catch his breath, but the more he tried, the harder it became to breathe. He put a hand up to stop Bill's advancing and grabbed for his inhaler. He took a few desperate puffs, but the panic wouldn't recede.

It didn't make any sense! Physical contact didn't usually stress him out like this! Hell, just last night, Richie had been-

Oh. Oh. Well. Shit.

He looked up at Bill and whispered something he'd known all along and just hadn't realized it. "It's not you. You're not my soulmate."

Bill smiled with sudden relief.

And then he was grabbed from behind by a very angry Richie Tozier, who shoved him as far away from Eddie as he possibly could. "What the fuck, Bill? You may be my best friend, but I swear, if you kissed him, I'll kick your fucking ass, I *swear*."

"Beep beep, Richie. He didn't kiss me," Eddie interrupted before Richie could explode more. Richie visibly sagged with relief, but the anger didn't leave him.

Stan had approached as well, and he didn't look happy. He took Bill's hand and observed the tense atmosphere. "What's going on?"

"Bill tried to kiss Eddie!" Richie accused, standing between them as if to keep Bill at bay.

"You what?!" Stan rounded on Bill, glaring, but Bill just smirked with a deviousness that would have rivaled Richie's.

"Just p-p-proving a point," he replied casually.

Eddie took this as a good time to intervene. He grabbed Richie's hand, and the taller boy turned around immediately to face him. His cheeks were still flushed with fury and his other hand was still curled into a fist, but Eddie thought he looked like a vision. It would be his luck that his soulmate was literally nicknamed *Trashmouth*.

He didn't say anything. Couldn't find the words to say, really. How did he tell Richie that he'd been right all along? That they really fucking were a match made in heaven?

Luckily, he didn't have to. Richie realized it, saw it in the way Eddie looked at him and felt it in the way he squeezed Richie's hand.

And Richie didn't fucking wait.

"Finally," he breathed, and then he was kissing Eddie. It was clumsy, and Richie's glasses bumped his face, but Eddie could feel the heat and the care and the love and knew that this was right. That Bill had been right when he said that he would know with a kiss. And when Richie cupped his face with trembling hands, he couldn't believe he hadn't realized it right from the very beginning.

2. Stenbrough

"Hey, watch it!"

Mocha frappuccino exploded all over Eddie Kaspbrak's favorite shirt, and Stanley Uris wondered if the day could get any worse. With a roll of his eyes, he used the edge of his coat sleeve to help wipe Eddie's shirt, so he felt it when Eddie stiffened.

Approximately five seconds later, he realized why. A realization that felt more like an electric current running through him-quick, sharp, and over the moment he noticed it.

Eddie looked up first, and Stan a few seconds later. He looked at both of them, but he already knew which one was his soulmate. Bill Denbrough drew his attention instantly, and he fixated on those blue eyes immediately.

Stan knew without knowing, without question or uncertainty that he and Bill were meant to be together, and he nearly cringed at the overused cliché. Where Eddie had been nervous, Stan had been skeptical. The idea that only one person existed for everybody was just preposterous, and he'd been ready to deny the notion entirely.

But the moment his soulmate looked back at him, Stan knew he'd been wrong all along, and that was something he never liked to admit to himself. This guy was worth it, though. He could hear Eddie and the other boy bickering, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Listening to them wasn't important, after all. He just needed to maintain eye contact with his soulmate, and everything would be all right.

Then Bill looked away, drawn by Eddie's upset, and the moment was broken. Stan shook his head a little to clear his mind, but he felt sick. He kept looking down at his wrist and then at the two boys, one of which was his soulmate.

Stan knew which one it was, though. He *knew*. It wasn't this tall idiot with those thick glasses, who hadn't taken his eyes off Eddie. It was-

"S-sorry about that. We w-w-eren't paying a-a-attention." Stan's soulmate held out his hand for Eddie and then Stan. "I'm B-B-Bill, and this is Ruh-Richie."

Bill. *Bill*. His soulmate's name was Bill. Stan looked down at his wrist again pointedly, waiting for somebody to catch on. Somebody else had to notice, right? Surely he wasn't the only one paying attention.

"I'm Eddie. This is Stan." Thankfully, Eddie looked over at him, and Stan made a show of peering down at his wrist again. He saw realization dawn on his best friend's face and knew that it had been enough. Eddie remembered.

And he was having a panic attack about it.

Eddie flailed for his aspirator, backpedaling, and glared when Richie tried to come forward. Bill looked back and forth between the two of them, worry etched on his features, and Stan couldn't stand it. He took a deep breath and tried to clear his head.

"You two," he said, surprised with how level his voice remained. Bill looked back at him immediately, and Stan could feel his cheeks beginning to burn. "Did your timers run out? Because ours just did."

"Buh-buh-both of you?" Bill raised his eyebrows, still focused on Stan, whose face grew even hotter. He nodded a little and averted his eyes in time to see Eddie stiffen again.

"Ours were five seconds apart! Whose timer went off first?"

"It's obvious, ain't it, Eds? It's you and me, and Big Bill and Stan the Man here! We're a match made in heaven!"

"Stop calling me that! And how can you be sure? Did your timer go off before Bill's?"

Hurt shot across Richie's face, gone just as quick as it had arrived, but they all saw it. Eddie floundered for a save, distraught, and settled for, "What if you're wrong, though? That's not fair to any of us if we pair up with the wrong person." Two minutes, and Eddie was already whipped. If he and Richie weren't soulmates, Stan would be stunned.

And offended. He was almost *positive* about Bill, and being wrong would devastate him. Not that there was anything wrong with Richie, but... from the way Richie had been staring at Eddie, he probably wouldn't handle it well, either.

"So neither of you have any idea?" Stan shook his head, annoyed at the lack of attention to something so important. They were meeting their *soulmates* today; the two of them could have been at least a *little* attentive for when the time came. "How are we supposed to figure it out then? That's the whole point of timers."

"Muh-muh-maybe we should juh-just play it by ear? W-we go on a few duh-dates and s-see who we're most com-com-patible with? Sh-shouldn't be tuh-too hard," Bill suggested with a glance at Stan, as if to see his thoughts on the idea. Stan shrugged a little; he didn't see any real harm when the outcome was certainly going to be the same.

Bill was his soulmate, and he had no problem waiting until everybody else figured it out, too. If only he could stop looking at Bill's *mouth*.

Stan, unfortunately, was paired up with Richie first. He tried to stave off his jealousy as he got ready for what he expected to be a terrible afternoon. If he had anything to do with it, the date would be cut short. Very, very short.

He felt Eddie's eyes on him, assessing him, and he fought the urge to tell him to get bent. He picked up his bird book, hand rubbing the cover lovingly before he stowed it away into his jacket pocket. If there was one way to get rid of a guy like Richie Tozier, then it was definitely bird-watching.

"Really, Stan?" Eddie raised an eyebrow. "On the first date?"

Stan shrugged and couldn't keep the grin off his face. "Hey, if he can't handle me bird-watching, then there's no way he's my soulmate. I just thought we would settle this the easy way."

Eddie's pencil tapped thoughtfully against the wood of the desk. He knew what Eddie was about to say; he just didn't know if he was ready to hear it. "You're really hoping for Bill, aren't you?"

And, to cover his own ass, Stan remarked, "Aren't you?"

The denial was right there on the tip of Eddie's tongue; Stan practically watched him swallow it. Well. Stan didn't need a date to know that Richie wasn't his soulmate. He just had to hope that Eddie didn't fall in love with Bill by the end of the day.

"Stan the Man!" Richie was already waiting at the park when Stan arrived, wearing a grin that Stan was pretty sure never left his face. He'd been sprawled out on a park bench, and he sat up to make room for Stan the moment he spotted him. "So what grand date have you planned for me today, hm? A nice stroll through the park, some kissin' under the bridge-"

Stan walked right up to him and shoved a pair of binoculars into his hands. "Bird watching."

"Bird watching?!" Richie repeated dumbly, too shocked to even sound outraged. Stan smirked.

"You heard me. There are at least 800 species of bird in the US and Canada, and I'm determined to see them all. Here." He held out his bird book to the dumbfounded Trashmouth. "You'll need this."

"You're... you're fucking serious about this. You're not shitting me. Bird watching." Richie rubbed the back of his neck and gave a short laugh. "You really know how to show a gal a good time."

Stan's smirk hadn't fallen. This was so easy, he almost felt bad. "Unless you really don't want to go through with this date," he added with a shrug. "We just might be soulmates, that's all."

"I really fucking hope we're not," Richie mumbled before he realized what he said. His eyes widened behind his coke-bottle glasses, and he fumbled over an apology. "Not that you aren't amazing! I'm sure you are! You're just... you're not...."

Stan didn't even have it in him to be angry. He sat down on the bench beside Richie and held his binoculars with tight hands. He felt a pain in his heart, and if he'd brought it up, he was sure that Richie could relate. Sighing loudly, he grimaced at the bespectacled boy.

"I'm not Eddie, right? I get it. You don't have to apologize."

"I feel like shit, though."

"You really don't have to."

Richie began to fidget, uncomfortable. "Why are you being so fucking cool about this when I'm being such an asshole?"

"Because I hope we're not soulmates, too. Don't take it the wrong way or anything, but you're not Bill. He's my soulmate. I know he is. I knew it the moment I saw him." Stan felt a huge weight lift off his chest the moment he said it.

Bill was his soulmate. Saying it was... freeing, and also horribly inconvenient at the same time, especially when said soulmate was on a date with another guy. Stan's blood boiled with jealousy, and he couldn't help but hope Bill and Eddie were as miserable as he and Richie were. He had the bad feeling they weren't.

"Then what the fuck are we doing here? Why aren't we going after them, dragging them apart, and taking what's ours, huh?" Richie demanded, ready to do just that when Stan grabbed his arm.

He didn't want to say it. He really didn't. He thought he might bring himself actual, physical pain to speak the words he had to say, but he did anyways.

"Because we owe it to Bill and Eddie to see this through. Just because we're sure who we belong with doesn't mean that they are, and... if Bill wanted to be with Eddie, I wouldn't be happy about it. I'd probably hate both of them, but I wouldn't stop them."

"I would," Richie murmured quietly. Stan glanced over at him, and he shrugged. "I've waited so fucking long for my soulmate, you know? And I know it's him. It has to be him. I've never wanted something so much in my whole fucking life as much as I want it to be him."

Stan said nothing. How could he, when he felt exactly the same? He thought his heart might crumble in agony if it wasn't Bill, and he couldn't stand how *melodramatic* that sounded. He hated being so emotionally vulnerable; it didn't make sense, wasn't logical, and

every piece of him wanted to fight against it.

He reached over to take Richie's hand. Wrong. *Wrong wrong wrong.* He ignored that.

Instead, Stan began to talk. He talked about Eddie, what he liked and hated. His fears, his desires, the way his voice would go up an octave when he was really freaking out-small things that only a best friend would know. Richie listened attentively, drinking in Stan's every word as if his life might depend on it.

When he was finished, neither one of them spoke for some time. Stan watched a few birds fly past, twittering jovially. *Robins*, his brain casually filed away as they vanished into the trees. His fingers itched to raise his binoculars and peer at them, but now was not the time. Not yet.

"... I've known Bill since we were kids," Richie began quietly.

"You don't have to do this," Stan interrupted immediately, his heart clenching painfully.

"Shut the fuck up. Yeah, I do. You told me about Eds, now I'm gonna tell you about Big Bill. You wanna know, don't ya?" Richie raised a knowing eyebrow at Stan, who could do nothing except sigh and nod soberly.

When Richie spoke of Bill, a part of Stan wondered if Richie loved Bill, too. Maybe Bill was one of those people that just pulled people in, stronger than gravity and warmer than the sun, and Stan wondered what chance he ever had of being with somebody like that. Stanley Uris, the only Jewish kid in from a small, conservative town, who loved birds and could be frustratingly meticulous, even to himself. How could he ever hope to be soulmates with somebody as bright and and perfect as Bill Denbrough? Why would Bill even *want* him?

Stan learned that Bill's mouth stuttered, but his brain didn't. That he was so smart and loved his little brother more than anything. That he wanted to be a writer and told the most amazing stories. That he was strong and loyal and would do anything for the people he cared

about. Would die for the people he cared about.

And Stan loved him even more.

He blinked back the stinging in his eyes. Richie's hand still felt heavy and wrong in his own, but he still didn't let go. "Do you think it'll be poetic justice if you and me end up being soulmates? Being so fixated on somebody we can't have?"

"Nah, we're not soulmates," Richie disagreed with a certainty that made Stan burn with jealousy. "Sorry, pal. Your hair's too curly-only my hair can be that fucking fabulous-and you're too tall and just not damn cute enough."

"Your hair isn't that great," Stan replied, but he was smiling. "And I get it. You wouldn't be my first choice, either. You're too tall, your limbs are too long, and your ego's too big. Then there's your jokes...."

"Your mom wasn't complaining about my jokes last night!" He raised a hand for a high five, and Stan just shook his head.

"Beep beep, Richie."

"Man, why'd Bill have to tell you guys about that? Eds is probably gonna beep me about everything tomorrow. Think he'll like going to the carnival?"

Stan snorted, smirking. "He'll hate that."

"I'm gonna take him anyways." Richie grinned right back. "I'm gonna tell him we made it to second base, too."

Now Stan full-on laughed. "He won't believe that! I don't do second base on the first date. I don't even do *kissing* on the first date."

"Bet you'd make an exception for Big Bill." Richie winked knowingly, still wearing that infuriating smirk of his, and Stan hated to admit that he was probably right. "I can't believe we spent our whole date talking about other people. We're pretty fucking bad at this."

"I'm pretty sure you started it."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Richie reached over to mess with Stan's mop of curls, and Stan shoved him away and pinned him with a dark glare. "You know what? You're not that bad, Uris. We should hang out more."

"You must really like bird-watching," Stan joked nonchalantly, but Richie's eyes widened behind his thick spectacles.

"Shit, that's right! We're supposed to be bird-watching!" When he spoke again, he'd adopted an accent that was probably meant to be Australian, but Stan thought sounded like a poor imitation of dying. He raised the binoculars to his face and began to swing around violently. "Ah think we've still got time to spot some wild magpies 'fore we've got to pop around for shrimp on tha barbie!"

"You know, that's not how Australian people talk."

"How the fuck would you know how Australian people talk?!"

When Stan got back to the dorm, Eddie still wasn't back. He sighed in annoyance and sat down to do his History report, confident that he wasn't going to be able to concentrate. Not when he kept thinking about what Bill and Eddie were doing. What kind of date had Bill taken him on? Richie hadn't said, and Stan hadn't asked.

After ten minutes, Stan realized how pointless this was. He went to the bathroom and washed his hands three times, still trying to get rid of the feeling of wrongness after holding Richie's hand. He washed them again for good measure, until the skin felt raw and red and tingling. He fixed his hair until he looked immaculate, as usual, and returned to his desk.

His mind raced, considering all of the possibilities until his brain added *Eddie got hit by a car and now has amnesia* to the list, and he realized he needed to stop. History. He should be focusing on History.

So he stared at his book and stared at his notes until all of the words blurred together, but anybody observing from the outside would have guessed he was deep in thought, intensely studying. It was a look that Stan had perfected for whenever he needed to have an existential crisis and didn't want anybody to know. That was the key to survival,

he'd learned.

Keep a neutral face, and people would believe he was fine.

That was why Eddie didn't ask him what was wrong when he entered. Stan, blinking away the cloud of disorientation he'd fallen behind, turned to watch his best friend collapse into his own chair. He fixed Eddie with a critical stare, trying to determine how the date with Bill had gone.

Eddie gave nothing away, merely searching Stan's expression in retaliation. Stan had nothing to hide: stiff posture, neat appearance, nonchalant visage. Eddie appeared to relax then, obviously having arrived at the conclusion that Stan's bird-watching session with Tozier hadn't gone well.

But no, Eddie had *no idea* who his soulmate was. Stan almost scoffed. Instead, he settled on a question.

"How was your date with Bill?"

Eddie shrugged a little, his lips quirked. Stan didn't like that. "Not bad. We had coffee, and he told stories. He's a great storyteller."

I know. Stan bit his tongue.

"What about you and Richie?"

Stan pursed his lips and glanced away from Eddie. He could be truthful, or he could mess with his friend some. "He was a gentleman, except for all of his stupid mom jokes. He listened to everything I had to say about bird watching, didn't complain too much, and even bought me lunch. And then...." Stan paused, allowing his sentence to trail off, and watched Eddie.

"And then?" He saw the precise moment when Eddie began to panic. Stan watched a million thoughts race through Eddie's eyes until the boy started hyperventilating.

"Aspirator, Kaspbrak," Stan warned and waited for Eddie to yank out his inhaler. He paused, giving his friend a moment to breathe. "And then he said that he hopes we're not soulmates."

"He... he said... *why* would he say that?" Eddie took another puff, still on the verge of an anxiety attack.

Stan shrugged, turning around in his chair and fighting to remain impassive. Eddie made it so hard to keep a straight face sometimes. "Oh, I have no idea. It's definitely not because he has it in his head that somebody else is his soulmate."

"That's-that's not fair to you, though! What a fucking asshole!"

Stan watched him toss his aspirator onto his desk, but he could tell it was all an act. Eddie was secretly happy, otherwise he wouldn't be so pissed. Stan felt a weight lift off his chest. "I didn't take it personally. I told him I hope he's not my soulmate, too."

"What?" Eddie was agitated. He stood up to pace, and Stan fought the urge to roll his eyes. "How could the two of you act like this? What about Bill and me? Are we the only ones taking this shit seriously?"

Probably. Stan didn't say that. That would just send Eddie into another panic attack. "Would you calm down already? It's not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?!"

Stan turned back around and grinned down at his History notes. "Your voice is doing that high-pitched thing again."

"I know it is!" Eddie sat back down, moody, and didn't say anything else. Stan could practically hear the wheels turning in his friend's head.

And Stan got it. He really did. Eddie wanted to be sure. Actually, really sure, and Stan did, too.

But could they ever be sure? *Really* sure? Yeah, he was approximately ninety percent positive that Bill was his soulmate, but the idea that they might never really know the truth did give him pause.

The thought of tomorrow rapidly approaching terrified him. What if he and Bill went on their date, and Bill didn't feel the same? What if Richie really *was* his soulmate? The two of them would spend the rest

of their lives pining for something they could never have, and wouldn't that just be his luck?

He and Bill were supposed to meet up for an early movie and then grab a bite to eat. Stan made sure he looked pristine, if for no other reason than to settle his own nerves. He hadn't cared so much when he was meeting up with Richie, but just the thought of Bill made his stomach roil.

Eddie had already left, wearing an expression of excited trepidation that gave Stan little peace of mind. Stan looked at his own reflection and thought he looked terrified. Neat and terrified. He tried to school his face into that impassive expression he was so good at. It just wasn't working.

Stan was about to leave for the Aladdin when his phone buzzed. Maybe it was just his nerves, but he didn't think that was a good sign. Swallowing around his tight throat, he pulled out his phone to read the text from Bill.

Hey, Stan! I'm so sorry, but I have to take a book to my friend for class. I won't be able to make the movie. Reschedule?

Stan read the message a few times, his jaw tightening until his teeth were near grinding. He didn't even know how to respond. He kept hearing a nagging in his mind, a quiet voice that kept getting louder and louder, repeating the same thing: Bill hadn't canceled on *Eddie*.

The message began to jerk back and forth, and Stan realized his hand was shaking. He took a deep breath to steel his nerves, but it wasn't working. Bill could have at least *called him*.

It was fine. Stan wasn't all that surprised. He didn't reply to Bill's text; instead, he sat down and continued to stare at the screen, trying to come to terms with this.

His phone vibrated again, repeatedly this time, and Stan blinked to clear his mind. Bill was calling him, probably to tell him the same thing he'd read in the text. Stan heaved a frustrated sigh and answered.

"Stuh-Stuh-Stuh-Sss...." Bill took a deep breath, sounding frazzled, and Stan felt a spike of annoyance at himself for not realizing sooner. Of *course* Bill had texted him; his stutter probably didn't make talking on the phone very easy.

"Bill," Stan greeted, impassive. Best to keep his emotions to himself. "It's okay. You don't owe me an explanation."

"Yes, I do! Yuh-you could be my suh-soulmate, and I'm f-fuh-fucking it up already!"

"I won't take it personally," Stan lied smoothly, more than a little happy to hear Bill so upset.

"If-if this wasn't an emergency...." Bill sighed, not done, and Stan waited politely. "Luh-listen, do you still wuh-wanna hang out? Yuh-you can come with me to duh-drop off the book, and we c-can do something e-else."

"You don't have to go out of your way for me," Stan tried to insist, but Bill's quiet reply choked the words right in his throat.

"I want to. I wuh-want to spend time with you, Stan. Cuh-can I come pick you up?" The hopeful tone in Bill's voice had his stomach in knots. Before he'd even realized it, Stan had agreed and ended the call.

He stood in the middle of his room, dumbfounded, and it felt like mere seconds later when he heard a knock on the door. The sound snapped him out of his reverie, and he shook his head a bit before heading toward the exit.

When he opened the door, he felt his heart still. He'd almost forgotten how it felt to actually have Bill in front of him. It was so natural, so perfect, so painful.

Bill offered him a nervous smile and fiddled with the thick algebra book in his hands. "H-hey, Stan. R-ruh-ready to go?"

"Yeah, let me lock up." Stan's hands shook while he fumbled with his key, and he was thankful that Bill either didn't notice or pretended not to.

He followed Bill out of the dorm and away from the campus. The two of them were quiet, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. Stan, for the most part, didn't know what to say, and Bill kept tossing him anxious glances.

Maybe this was a mistake. He looked over at Bill, who was taller than him and walked with a kind of natural grace. Stan couldn't believe how easy being in his company was. He imagined that he must look out of place next to somebody so attractive, but Stan couldn't find the energy to care.

Bill caught him staring and smiled; Stan's cheeks began to burn, and he hastily looked away. "S-sorry again about th-the movies. I totally fuh-forgot until she texted me about the b-book."

"It's okay. I wasn't that set on seeing a movie. Where are we meeting your friend?" Stan almost kicked himself. Did he always have to sound so down-to-business?

"Ah-arcade. Sh-she and her s-soulmate are o-old friends of ours. M-me and Ruh-Richie, I mean."

Stan swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. So this wasn't just a friend. This was an old friend, probably a childhood friend. And he was meeting her on his first date with Bill. Stan's hands were shaking again.

"H-hey, uh...." Bill's stutter got worse, Stan realized, when he was nervous about something. At least Stan wasn't the only one feeling so unhinged. "Eh-Eddie said he di-didn't want to do anything t-too romantic. N-n-no ki-kissing and shit."

"And you want to know if I have the same rules," Stan finished helpfully. He bit his lip, considering. He thought of Eddie's words from the night before about being fair and taking this seriously, so he reluctantly nodded. If Eddie could resist Richie's advances, then Stan could fight his own urges. "It's probably for the best right now. At least until we're sure."

Bill took a deep breath and nodded, looking as disappointed as Stan felt. Stan could give a little and tried to think of the least dangerous

thing the two of them could do.

"We could hold hands? If, uh... if you want."

"Y-yeah! I'd like that!" Bill brightened up immediately, and Stan smiled in relief.

Then Bill took his hand, and a sudden, embarrassing heat burned in his cheeks because this was *right*. So *right*, he almost crumbled from the intensity. His feet stopped moving, his legs like jelly as he tried to compose himself. This feeling was terrifying, crippling, and so *right*, he almost cried.

"Wow," Bill murmured, having stopped as well and now gazed at Stan with such wonder and awe, he could hardly stand it. Nobody had ever looked at him like that. Like he was the center of the universe. Like nothing made sense, but it was okay because he had all of the answers.

Stan had never felt more afraid in his life. He wanted to run, to escape, but a very real desire to hold onto this newness kept him rooted to the spot.

He asked, "Did you hold Eddie's hand at all?"

"N-no," Bill replied with a shake of his head. "Wh-what about you and Ruh-Richie?"

Stan nodded, pleased at the flicker of jealousy he saw in Bill's blue eyes. "It didn't feel like... like this."

"Do-do you think this-this means-"

"I don't know what this means," Stan interrupted before Bill could get too excited. He pulled his hand away, already missing the contact. But they were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, and people were staring. He shoved his hands into his pockets, grasping at his bird book as if it might be all that held him to the physical plane. "We should keep going. Your friend is probably wondering where you are."

"... y-yeah." Bill wore a strange expression, and he opened his mouth

to say something else. No words came out, though, so they continued on their way in silence. Stan's hand felt cold without Bill's fingers wrapped around it, and he struggled to keep from reaching out again.

He wanted to hold his hand *so badly*, but he was afraid. He'd been so certain, right from the very beginning, that Bill was his soulmate. Now that he was starting to get actual confirmation, he didn't know how to handle it.

As the two of them approached the arcade, Stan spotted a familiar girl with short red hair standing outside. She was beautiful and tall, and a cigarette hung out of her mouth. The moment she spotted them, she grinned and raised a hand to wave. "Bill!"

"H-hey, Bev. Th-thanks for waiting." Bill handed her the book, which she kissed and then stowed away in her bag. "Wh-where's Ben?"

"Waiting for me at the library. It's the first fucking week of college, and he's already practically living there." She shook her head, frustrated, but the fondness in her eyes betrayed that she didn't mind too much. "Did Richie send me anything? He owes me a pack of smokes after Overwatch last night. We had a bet going on to see which one of us was the better sniper. He's such a shitty Hanzo."

"H-he keeps saying the bet wuh-wasn't fair, so he won't puh-pay up," Bill explained with a laugh.

"Hey, I can't help it if I'm an amazing Widowmaker, and he can't aim. Fucking Trashmouth. I'll get back at him." Her eyes settled on Stan, her smile friendly, and he couldn't help but think again she looked familiar. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh! Th-this is Stanley Uris. Stan, this is B-Beverly Marsh."

"Have we met before?" Stan asked as he shook Bev's outstretched hand.

Beverly scrutinized him, thinking. Then her eyes lit up, and she began laughing. "I think we have! We met at orientation. Richie made some nasty jokes, and you threatened to castrate him and staple his dick to his forehead."

"That w-was you?" Bill snickered. "Ruh-Richie didn't shut up about that for a wuh-week! I was sad I m-missed it."

"That was Richie?" Stan repeated, his mind racing to put two and two together. He definitely remembered the incident. He'd been bumped into, and when Beverly stopped to apologize, one of her companions had made some dick jokes. Now that he was thinking about it, he realized that *was* Richie.

He'd met Richie before. So he *couldn't* be Stan's soulmate. Which meant....

Stan looked at Bill to see if he'd realized. He had, if his delirious grin was any indication. Stan swallowed, his heart thumping loudly in his temple, and he opened his mouth to speak. What was he supposed to say? *Hey, guess what? We really are soulmates. Hope you're okay with that.*

Thankfully, Bill saved him the embarrassment and spoke up first.

"Thanks, Bev. We have to go. We'll see you later!" Bill grabbed Stan's hand again, ready to drag him away. It took Stan a moment to realize that he didn't even stutter.

Beverly looked back and forth between the two of them, a knowing glint in her eyes. "Have fun, boys!"

And then Bill was pulling him down the street. Stan stumbled, struggling to keep up with Bill's quick pace, and Bill helped keep him from falling on his face. Bill held his gaze for a moment, so many unspoken emotions glistening there that stole away Stan's breath. The urgency of the situation infected him, and he matched Bill's gait, desperate for the privacy of his dorm room.

He fumbled with the key, one hand still enveloped in Bill's, and he could hardly concentrate with the way Bill kept invading his space. He was so close, he could have pressed a kiss to Stan's forehead, and that somehow just wasn't close enough.

At last, he got the key in the door, and then they were falling inside, pulling each other close. The door barely closed before they were

kissing, messy and eager and far from perfect. Bill held his waist in one hand, and the other dug into his curls, making a mess of them, and for the first time in his life, Stan didn't care. Bill could muss his hair and put wrinkles in his clothes all he wanted, as long as he kept kissing him like that.

"I w-wanted it to be you," Bill whispered, breathless, between kisses. "Th-the moment I saw you, I just fucking *knew*. I knew."

Stan pulled him back in for another kiss, deeper this time and at a different, somehow magical angle, and he groaned in relief. Bill felt so solid in his grasp, so real, so *his*, and he hadn't realized how much he had needed this until that precise moment.

And Bill is wiping away Stan's tears, smiling adoringly, and Stan almost can't believe it. "You... you mean that? You aren't just saying that because now we know for sure?"

"Stan," Bill murmured, lips soft and sweet as they kissed every inch of Stan they could reach, "wh-why would I ever want anyb-body else?"

"You barely even know me yet! I-I have OCD about the stupidest things, I'm uptight, my favorite hobby is *bird-watching*, and I'm the only Jewish kid from the smallest town you've ever seen. Half the time, I don't even know what it *means* to be Jewish! I'm-I'm just-"

"My soulmate," Bill interrupted, his voice taking on a serious, mesmerizing tone. "Y-you're my soulmate. Wh-what about me? Muh-my biggest f-fear is something happening to my little buh-brother, I n-never come to dinner on t-time because I g-get so d-damn involved in wruh-writing, I've been sketching birds muh-my whole *life* and wondering wh-why the fuck I d-do, and I've b-been in lo-love with you since the m-moment I met you and w-worrying about whether you could eh-ever feel th-the same."

Stan stared at him, completely flummoxed. It hadn't just been him. This whole time, he'd been so concerned whether he could ever measure up to the perfection of Bill Denbrough, and Bill had been thinking the same thing. Stan reached up to frame Bill's face with his hands, stroking smooth cheeks and watching the way Bill practically sagged into his touch.

"You... you sketch birds," he whispered, emotion causing his voice to break, and Bill turned his head to kiss one of his palms.

"I h-have five fuh-fucking sketch books filled with b-birds," Bill confirmed with a grin.

"We're soulmates."

"We are."

And Stan smiled a real, genuine smile, letting the warmth of his soulmate envelop him in a gentle shroud of *want*. He'd never felt so *wanted* in his whole life, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever get used to it. But he knew that Bill would be patient with him, already understanding him completely, and that wasn't half bad.

Somehow they ended up on Stan's bed, basking in each other's attention. Bill was kissing at his throat, his nose nudging aside the collar of his polo shirt to leave a nice, red mark that Stan would have a fun time covering up tomorrow. Stan hummed in appreciation, his hand carding through Bill's auburn locks.

"I don't think we should tell Richie and Eddie," he decided suddenly. Bill raised his head to blink at him curiously, and Stan kissed him before continuing. "Well. We figured it out on our own. I think the two of them should do the same."

"H-how long do you think th-that will take?"

Stan pursed his lips. "Richie's already pretty sure. I think Eddie will be the problem. He wants hard proof."

"We c-could introduce him to Bev?"

"Too easy. Besides, that's basically leading them to the answer." Stan huffed a little. He loved Eddie, he really did, but the boy could be so impossible when he wanted to be.

Bill suddenly grinned. "I h-have an idea!"

"What is it?"

"I'll t-take care of everything. Juh-just make sure you get Richie to that buh-big tree on campus tomorrow."

"You aren't even going to tell me what you have planned?" Stan frowned, put out, but then Bill kissed him, sweet and slow and soft, and soon he forgot all about Richie and Eddie and Bill's plan.

By the time Bill left, night had already fallen, and Stan had hardly any time to get his appearance back in order before Eddie came home. He still managed to tame his hair and smooth out his shirt before Eddie walked in carrying a huge pink teddy bear. He stared at the bear, trying to find something to say and coming up empty. Blushing, Eddie rushed to his room and returned several seconds later, sans bear.

"So how was your date with Bill?" he asked, an edge of nervousness to his tone, but Stan wasn't having that. No, he wasn't spilling a single word about what had happened with Bill.

Naturally, he brought attention to something much more interesting. "Why do you have a pink teddy bear?"

Eddie fidgeted with the hem of his shorts. "Mr. Snugglepuss. We went to the carnival. Richie won him."

"A carnival?" So Richie had gone through with the idea after all. Still, Stan crinkled his nose and played the part of a surprised roommate. "I bet you enjoyed that."

"It... wasn't that bad," Eddie confessed slowly, sounding amazed himself about this strange and unexpected breakthrough. Eddie Kaspbrak went to a carnival, a practical breeding ground for infection, and not only lived to tell the tale but had fun, too. This was a day for the books. "I enjoyed myself, and I'm guessing you did, too?"

Stan felt the blood rushing to his cheeks, and no amount of schooling his expression could help. He swallowed and fought against the smile threatening to curl at the corners of his lips. Lips that had been kissing Bill not even an hour ago.

"Do you think Richie was right in the beginning?"

Stan didn't hesitate. He felt a little bad, but Eddie needed to realize himself. So far, he was the only one of them that hadn't known right off the bat who his soulmate was. Maybe he did know, Stan reasoned. Maybe he knew deep down, but he wanted the security of confirmation. Stan couldn't really blame him there.

So he lied to his best friend for his own good. "Beats me. It's possible, but there's no real way to be sure. We can go on as many dates as we want, but in the end, will we ever really know the truth?"

The shadow of doubt cloaked Eddie's expression, and Stan knew it was a job well done. Casually, he adjusted his shirt collar to hide the evidence Bill had left behind and prayed that whatever plan Bill had would work out smoothly. If for no other reason than the freedom to kiss his soulmate in public.

Just as Bill had insisted, Stan dragged Richie across the campus to the big tree. Richie hadn't gone without a fight, that trashmouth of his firing off at a million miles an hour to argue why he didn't see what the big deal was.

"It's a *tree*, Stanny Boy! What could be so fucking interesting about a tree?" Richie complained, dragging his feet, and Stan elbowed him.

"If you'd move along at a decent pace, maybe you'd find out. Are your long legs just compensating for something?"

"Hey!" Richie glared at him, offended, before he shrugged and grinned proudly. "That wasn't half bad!" He raised his hand for a high five, which Stan blatantly ignored.

He could see the tree in the distance, and he thought he spotted Bill and Eddie beneath the canopy. Bill was saying something to Eddie, who hesitated before nodding. Then Bill began to move closer, and Stan felt his whole body freeze.

What was Bill doing? Was he... was he going to *kiss* Eddie? No. No, that couldn't be right. Bill was *his* soulmate; why would he kiss somebody else?

Richie had arrived at the same conclusion as Stan, and his whole body tensed with rage. "He better not fucking be doing what I think he's doing! I'll fucking kill him!"

Before Stan could say anything, Richie took off toward them. Those long legs *were* good for something. With a sigh, Stan followed at a reasonable pace, satisfied when he saw Richie tear Bill away from Eddie. He stood between the two like a barrier, yelling loudly and ignoring Eddie when he tried to placate him.

"What's going on?" Stan asked, his hand instinctively slipping into Bill's as he looked around at the mess he'd let his soulmate cause. Bill didn't even look the least bit apologetic.

"Bill tried to kiss Eddie!" Richie accused, actually using Eddie's real name and not one of the nicknames Eddie swore he hated.

"You what?" Stan turned to Bill venomously and tried to tug his hand back. No wonder Bill wouldn't tell him what his idea was! He knew Stan would never agree to it, and he'd been *right*.

Bill wouldn't let go of him, though, staying calm in spite of Stan's wrath. He merely squeezed his hand put on a shit-eating grin. "Just p-proving a point."

Richie looked confused, about to start spouting obscenities and threats again, when Eddie grabbed his hand. The two faced each other wordlessly, realization passing between the two of them, and Stan had seen enough. He tugged at Bill, who followed him without argument away from the tree and the their two friends.

Stan hadn't said anything yet. He still felt incredibly angry. Even though Bill hadn't kissed Eddie, just the thought that he might have still burned him up inside. He could feel Bill's worried eyes flickering over to him, but Stan didn't address him. Not yet.

"I'm s-s-suh-sorry I d-didn't tell you muh-muh-my idea," Bill murmured, his thumb running up and down Stan's skin. His stutter was worse; he must've realized how angry Stan was.

The fury began to drain from him, pacified by Bill's earnest concern.

Bill cared about him and couldn't stand the idea of Stan being mad at him, and Stan... well, Stan couldn't stand that he *couldn't* stay mad at him. He'd already forgiven him, and wasn't that just frustrating?

Stan stopped walking. He turned right to Bill, his famed neutral expression set firmly in place, and Bill looked genuinely worried. It might have been a bit cruel, but Bill *did* keep his plan from Stan. It had been a good plan, but Stan still didn't like it.

He couldn't keep his soulmate waiting for long. He grabbed Bill by the collar and pulled him down into a searing kiss that Bill melted into immediately. People were staring and pointing and whispering, but Stan couldn't care less. It was back again-that sense of *this is right, this is how things are supposed to be*. That feeling he'd been getting right from the very beginning.

"Don't kiss anybody else, no matter the reason." Stan tried to sound firm, but his words came out more like a plea.

"Wuh-wouldn't dream of it," Bill promised, his forehead pressed to Stan's so their breaths could mingle.

Stan smiled, his fingertips slotting perfectly with Bill's as he leaned in for another kiss. He didn't feel alone or unwanted anymore and never would again. He had Bill. He would always have Bill.

Finally, everything felt *right*.